

Grace Chaillier Interview

No date given.

Center for Native American Studies, Northern Michigan University.

START OF AUDIO

Justin Runde (JR): My name is Justin Runde, I'm going to be conducting the interview today. I'll be asking the majority of the questions. My name is spelled J-U-S-T-I-N R-U-N-D-E. Okay, so I'm going to ask you the first question. What is your name and can you spell it for us?

Grace Chaillier (GC): I'm Grace Chaillier, last name is C-H-A-I-L-L-I-E-R.

JR: Thank you. Can you tell us about your professional path and what led you to this position?

GC: Well I have three degrees from Northern

JR: Okay.

UFV: Wow.

GC: Yeah. And one of those is Native American Studies Minor. So I was, lived in the Chicago Suburbs for seventeen years and came back to Marquette in the mid-90s and decided that I wanted to finish a degree at Northern that I had started before I left and went to Chicago. So I did that, started on that first degree, finished that first degree and then did two Master's degrees after that. And in the course of that, those two Master's Degrees I was already connected to the Center, because I had gotten a minor in Native American Studies and there was some shifting of people leaving here and classes opening up with nobody to teach them and what not, so I was asked, approached to start teaching a class for the Center for Native Studies, and that was the beginning of this path that I'm on now. So that was ten years ago.

JR: Okay.

GC: Been, you know, teaching for the Center now for ten years.

JR: What are your favorite classes to teach today, like what are some of your favorites?

GC: I am teaching one of my favorites this semester that I've only taught once before, it's First Nations Women.

JR: Okay.

GC: Yeah, so that is a 400-level class and it's in the Gender Studies Minor along with being, counting for the Native American Studies Minor. You know, I feel very fortunate. This has always been a small class with not very many people in it and this semester I have two Native American men in that class. It is so wonderful to get the male point of view in a women's, you

know, gender studies class. And especially when it's kind of skewed to the Native, which this class is, and to get men's view on that. And one of them is a forty-four year old, older, non-traditional student who has children of his own. You know, and so it, he is like the perfect person for this class because the women, you know, bounce stuff off of him and he tells his opinion. He's older, he has formed opinions, he doesn't feel the pressure of a peer group like young people do, so he just says what he feels.

Kira VanWagner (KVW): By First Nation do you mean like Canadian and Greenlandic?

GC: Well we use that term for both down here, because we're so close to Canada. You know, April and I, our Director and other people in this office use that term for Native Americans in the United States along with Canadian people.

KVW: Alright, because I'm First Nations, so.

GC: What are you, Cree?

KVW: No, I'm Greenlandic Inughuit.

GC: Oh wow, cool! I've never met an Inughuit.

KVW: Dual-community.

GC: Cool, wow. That's wonderful. Good for you, and we're glad you're here. That's such an unusual, you know, affiliation to have here at Northern. That's great that you're here. Yeah, we get people from all over. It's amazing.

JR: So could you tell us a little bit about the path to getting the major you have now? Has received?

GC: Well, that would be a better question for April. That's been a long, convoluted battle to get this, our minor finally approved as a major. And she's the one who has done most of the work on that. And it has been very long and involved, and I couldn't even begin to speak to that because I don't know that much about it. It's not my area of expertise or focus of, you know, endeavor.

JR: Okay. What is your motivation or what was your motivation to start teaching here? Like besides the

GC: Well the motivation in general is being Native American. You know, and having experienced racial discrimination as a Native American person, and having had a mother who went to Indian Boarding schools and seen the fallout in my own family of the intergenerational trauma and historic grief of Boarding School experience. So, you know, that's a part of it, growing up as a kid and just knowing that things were sort of off in your family, but not really being able to put your finger on exactly why that was or you know, where that might have come from. And then as an adult learning, because we don't learn about that. Right? In schools, in this country, you don't learn about Indian Boarding Schools. Indian Boarding School experience in the United States of American, you don't learn about the Residential School Experience in Canada. When you go to Junior High or High School in this country, they don't teach about that.

It's glossed over, it's shoved underneath the carpet because it's not a very, doesn't speak well to the history of the United States of America.

JR: It's not very common knowledge, yeah.

GC: I mean things that are negative about the history of the United States of America, you don't really learn. Students don't really learn. You don't learn that the negative side of our history so much, it's the positive this and that that's underlined and concentrated upon and what-not. So, when I finally learned all about the boarding schools in a class here at Northern, you know, that was, became something that I thought I need to dedicate at least a part of my life, you know, to teaching other people about this experience. So I created a class here at Northern: History of Indian Boarding School Education, and I teach it every other semester. I've been teaching it every other semester, I'm teaching it now. And April came to me, our Director came to me and asked me if I would be willing to try to teach it again in the winter, if we could get it to fill enough to go. And it's already a go, now I have enough students by far, with a cushion even of students for that class. So we're going to be teaching that again in the winter. You know, and that's part of my personal mandate is to inform as many people as possible about the Indian Boarding School experience in the United States and the Residential School Experience in Canada, which, when ___ in the United States, Boarding School experience was almost a hundred years. Wasn't a short-lived, you know [Snaps fingers] flame in the moment. And in Residential School in Canada was over a hundred years. So these are long, involved Aboriginal experiences. You know, and they created that intergenerational trauma and historic grief, which is part of the reason why we have so much alcoholism, domestic violence, so many social problems in Indian Country stem directly from this boarding school and residential school experience.

Jessica Campoy (JC): This is actually the first time I'm hearing about the boarding school experience.

GC: It doesn't surprise me.

JC: Can you explain further the boarding, like what happened?

GC: Yeah, well it's, you know, like I said I teach a four credit class about this so it's kind of hard to like start, you know, I mean, explaining it because it's very complex. It was basically was started by, it was one man's idea. Richard Henry Pratt started the Carlyle Indian Boarding School in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. It was his original idea, and it was to solve what at time had been discussed for generations, the Indian problem. What are we going to do with these Indians? There are so many of them, they're confined to reservations, they're so expensive. We have to be supporting them all the time now because they can't hunt and gather like they previously had before we overran their country. You know, they're concentrated on Reservations, they're living in poverty, you know. What are we going to do about these thousands and thousands of Indians that we're just having to support year upon year upon year with thousands and thousands of dollars, right? So Richard Henry Pratt said, "Let's educate them. Let's start with the youngest ones and educate them to assimilate them into dominant mainstream culture." So that was the idea, the basis of boarding schools. So he started the first

one and Congress was so impressed with what he accomplished with Carlisle Indian Boarding School in Carlisle Pennsylvania that they opened up twenty-four more Off-Reservation Boarding schools across the United States and by the time that experiment was over with over a hundred thousand Indian children have been federally mandated to go to those schools, and it wasn't, you know, they didn't have a choice, you can go to this school or not go to this school: you can go to public school or you can go to this school. No. You went, for years and years and years. And people, if you didn't, if the parents didn't want to send their kids, the government sent out representatives, agents who snatched the kids, literally, out of their parent's arms and put them in conveyances; trains, cars, some, in Canada planes, airplanes and transported them directly to the schools. And many times, many cases, those students didn't go home for years. They did not go home for holidays, they didn't go home in the summertime. Sometimes they didn't go home for six, eight, ten years. They were incredibly changed individuals when they finally saw their parents and their grandparents and their families again. Dressed differently, hair differently, had lost their indigenous language, were now fluent English speakers. So some of them had grandparents and aunts and uncles who didn't speak English at all and they could no longer communicate with those people because they were now English speakers and many of their older relatives didn't speak English at all. So it created this gap, you know, between the younger generation and the older generations that in many cases was never resolved, you know. That the younger generation just went on to be those acculturated/assimilated people and the older generations were never able to communicate with their younger generation again. So I mean, that created lots, you could imagine the problems that, think about your own family. If that happened in your family you could no longer talk to your grandparents.

KVW: I can't, I was adopted out.

GC: And that's another thing, that's another whole subject. Adopting out, you know, we were just talking about that in my First Nations Women class this morning, about adopting out. That's been a huge problem in Indian Country. Indian children being taken out of their parents' arms and adopted out because the powers that be, you know, whomever. Social workers didn't feel that their birth parents weren't taking care of them in the way that they should. And that happened, again, because of the Boarding Schools and Residential Schools, they came back from those schools, they felt divorced from their communities, you know, they had suffered sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, emotional abuse in these schools and they were just, like, you know, damaged. Terribly emotionally, mentally damaged. So then these people found a partner, got married, had children and were, didn't know how to parent, because they hadn't been parented themselves. They'd been taken into that boarding school when they were six or seven or eight years old and cared for by dormitory matrons and administrators and teachers who didn't hug them, didn't say "I love you." Didn't say, "You're a worthwhile human being." You know, so they grew up with self-esteem like this, non-existent, non-existent. So then these people are trying to raise children, right? And have no clue how to do that. They're impatient, they're yelling and hollering at them, they're doing what they saw and what they experienced in the boarding schools which is physical violence, emotional violence, verbal violence, sexual violence in their own families. So this happens to generation upon generation upon generation and is ongoing in Indian Country. Still follow from that Indian Boarding School experience,

ongoing. Still in our communities. So I tell my students in my boarding school class, “Nobody should wonder why there’s so many social problems in Indian Country.” It all comes from this, basically. Almost all of it, the alcoholism, the drug abuse, the domestic violence, suicide, murder, all of it basically stems from this boarding. None of us have escaped that. There’s not an Indian person living today that hasn’t had a mother, father, grandma, grandpa, auntie, uncle, you know, somebody in their family that went to Boarding School. Yeah, so it’s all just filters into our communities still today. That’s why we have so many problems.

JR: Do you mind me asking, what, which tribe do you affiliate yourself with?

GC: I’m Sicangu Lakota, Burnt-Thigh Clan, Rosebud Sioux Reservation. So the government calls us Sioux, S-I-O-U-X. That’s a government terminology that was on treaties and governmental paperwork, but when we self-identify we say Lakota. I am Lakota.

JR: Okay, are there any specific stories that you grew up with, based on Native American Culture, that you would share?

GC: Well my mom used to tell me about stories when she was in Boarding School.

JR: Okay.

GC: You know I, I have a sad, terrible story that my mom told my sister and I when we were little kids about her Boarding School experience which I spun into a fictional account for one of my thesis inclusions for my Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. So yeah, I mean we have some stories.

JR: Okay. How does the Native American, the Center for Native American Studies interact with the community here. Like how do they, kind of like just do to raise awareness of, just like events and?

GC: Well we do have events, I mean it’s not just us the Center so, it’s usually a combination of different entities like the Native American Student Association for example. There’s actually three Native organizations on this campus. The one that’s most active that people hear about the most is the Native American Student Association. So they just had the First Nations Food Taster this past Friday. And we make posters up, our Director does that. She’s a great poster producer, and those posters are posted everywhere; in town, all around town, besides all around campus. And we have people who take them out to the local reservations both Bay Mills and Keweenaw Bay and so they’re, basically they’re everywhere. And community members come to that, Native and non-Native. It’s a fundraiser for our Powwow, so we, and yeah we charge kind of high prices for it because we feel it’s worth it for the food that people get. I mean the food is amazing every year and we make a lot of money off of that and that money is all spun into our Powwow. So the Food Taster is always first Friday in November, and then our annual Learning to Walk Together Traditional Powwow is always the weekend closest to St. Patrick’s Day in March.

JR: What kind of activities do you do at the Powwow.

GC: Well, the normal, you know.

UFV: Dancing.

GC: Area, for the, I mean Powwows are very different regionally, that tribes do different things at Powwows regionally. Like where I'm from, they always, they often have rodeos associated with Powwows. Yeah. They almost always have a rodeo, you know, and the Powwow's outdoors so they have a rodeo grounds and a Powwow grounds right next to each other and so there's a rodeo and a Powwow all connected. You know, that's my people and people out in the West do that. Up here it's, we have Grand Entry, that's the beginning of it and then there's a lot of Inter-Tribal dances, we have an M.C. who tells what the Inter-Tribal dances are. And the Inter-Tribals are, the M.C. will encourage everyone to dance at the inter-Tribals. So students who don't even have regalia who are non-native can get out in the circle and dance at an inter-Tribal, so you just have to listen, you know to the M.C. and they'll say to, you know, loud and proud, "This is an Inter-Tribal! Everybody get out there in the circle!" You know, so everybody should feel welcome to do that.

KVW: I'm trying to get her to dance cause I'm planning on dancing in the Powwow.

GC: Good, good. And you should encourage people. It's good that you do, yeah, it's good that you do. So lots of things go on at our Powwow too. We have all kinds of things going on all the time, I mean there's things going on in the sidelines that half the people don't even know about. There's vendors selling things all around and for Native people it's like a community get-together. Old friends that you haven't seen for maybe a year since this last Powwow come to this one and you do too, so you know you're going to see that person there. It's a gathering of community and friends that you maybe haven't seen for months and months, or this time last year or whatever. That's how Powwows generally are.

JR: Awesome.

KVW: How big do these Powwows get?

GC: Well they're, ours is little as Powwows go. You know, we have, on Saturday when we've had a large turnout we maybe have had six hundred people, you know, go in front of our entry desk there. Which that, to us, that's a huge turnout. The largest Powwow in North America is the third week in April every year. It's Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and there are tens of thousands of people at Gathering of Nations every year. And Indian people come from all over North America, they come from Alaska and Canada, and Mexico, to go to Gathering of Nations. So the Grand Entry of Gathering of Nations is an amazing thing to see because the regalia is just from everywhere, and every kind of regalia you can possibly imagine.

JR: yeah, my...

GC: Alaskans wear a lot of fur, you know, so there they are in the Southwest in the Spring time when it's warm out with all this fur on, you know, but that's their regalia.

JR: My aunt recently purchased a house in Sante Fe and so she attended it last year and she had a great time, and she was telling me all these stories about what happened, it sounded amazing.

GC: Yeah. I have yet to talk to a person who said, "I had a bad time at Gathering of Nations."

KVW: Have you gone?

GC: It's on my bucket list, I haven't gone there yet. Yeah.

KVW: I've had, I've had one bad experience at a Powwow. A person actually told me, they're just like, "No. You don't belong here because you're not a real Indian." I'm like...

GC: Unfortunately Indian people say that to Indian people and it's...

KVW: He was a Cherokee.

GC: yeah. We have discussions about that here in this office and we call that "Crabs in a Bucket". You know how crabs grope, climb up over other crabs and pull those crabs down so they'll fall, so they can get over the top of them and so they can get. You know, it's like pulling down other people so you can pull yourself up. Yeah.

KVW: I understand because Inughuits, there's only 800 of us. We're a tiny people.

GC: Yeah.

KVW: So I mean, yeah. I understand, like, but.

GC: There's plenty of tribes in the United States too that are tiny little tribes, especially on the Eastern seaboard, you know where they were so decimated in numbers on the Eastern seaboard, and even in the Southeast. A lot of tribes that are very, very small. Very few federally recognized tribes in the Eastern seaboard and in the Southeastern United States. Most of those 567 Federally Recognized Indian Tribes are all in the Midwest and the western states and in Alaska there's two hundred-and-some just in Alaska. Alaska in an amazing place for Indian people.

JR: What are some of the obstacles that the Center for Native American Studies has gone through trying to acquire the major?

GC: Again, that's an April question.

JR: Okay.

GC: yeah. That's just not my focus of expertise and not something I'm, you know we all depend on her. Our Director, our leader, to be taking care of this and she has been taking care of it, on-going as we've worked toward that major for years and years. It seems like, you know, from my perspective a large part of it has been NMU Administration.

JR: Okay.

GC: Just saying, it's not, "The time's not right." You know? "The time's not right. We need to wait. You need to be stronger as an entity here." You know, "The time's not right." It seems like that's been over and over and over again. So why they decided to do this at this particular time when so much else seems to be going in the toilet around here in general on Northern's campus, I don't really understand it but.

JR: Anything?

UFV: Mm-mm.

JR: Okay. Is there anything you would like to add or would like to leave out of the recording?

GC: No, not really. So what are you going to do with this? What's the project?

JR: The project is we're going to submit it to the Archives for later use of just...what the thing. To go back and have it as a resource for future...

KVW: Generations.

JR: generations and projects as kind of like an.

GC: Okay, so are you working with Marcus Robyns and the group over in NMU Archives?

JR: No we're not. This is separate.

KVW: No we are submitting this back to Kathryn.

JR: Kathryn, yeah.

KVW: And then she's going to hand it off from there.

GC: I wonder if she's going to compile everybody's work, all their interviews so it's like, so they play like one long interview or one interview right after another?

JR: Um. Not too sure. All I know is we're going to have it scribed out and it's going to be submitted to the library as well.

GC: Okay. Interesting. Alright, well good for you. Maybe you want to leave out that toilet part. [Chuckles]

JR: Well, that it? Okay, we're going to end the recording now. Yeah.

END OF AUDIO